

CHERYL BLACKWELL BRYSON

Refusing to Settle for Mediocrity

by John Toth

“I was raised to believe there is no substitute for excellence, and that is the standard I hold myself to,” affirms Cheryl Blackwell Bryson, labor and employment partner in the Chicago office of **Duane Morris LLP**. “As an African-American woman at a major law firm, I’ve never had the luxury of being mediocre and I would never settle for that level of performance.” Having headed the office’s Employment Law and Management Labor Relations Practice, served on the Duane Morris Board of Managers, and received the National Bar Association’s Herman Sweatt Presidential Achievement Award for outstanding accomplishment, Bryson’s career exemplifies her commitment to excel.

Perhaps even more striking is that Bryson is equally committed to helping her clients achieve excellence and success. “Successful client relationships make my work most meaningful,” she believes. “I always ask a client, ‘What is your objective?’ then work with that person to help them achieve it. Whether I’m dealing with in-house counsel or with management at a client, my goal is to make them look good by educating them on employment law so they can achieve their business objective.” Bryson has mentored a number of clients and helped several advance their careers by moving from staff lawyer to general counsel roles and recalls a typical example. “One of my clients wanted to become general counsel for a major corporation. I coached her to make non-traditional career moves, and ultimately, she became a general counsel.”

Never Any Surprises

Bryson divides her practice equally between counseling employers on how to avoid or resolve workplace disputes and representing them in employment litigation. “I consider myself very proactive in how I work with clients,” she says. “That requires listening to their concerns, making sure I’ve understood everything necessary to resolve the problem, making the best recommendation possible, and following up with everyone concerned to ensure that things are done properly. I make certain that nothing falls between the cracks, and resolve problems as cost-efficiently and effectively as possible.”



A key aspect of Bryson’s counseling is to take responsibility for ensuring that clients are fully informed about every aspect of a matter. “I never met a client who wanted anything but to have all the facts. Above all, I don’t believe a client should ever be hit with a surprise about anything. Eliminating surprises builds rapport and trust.” For each lawsuit, her first step is to investigate the issues involved and know how defensible a position the client has. “Whether I do it myself or directly oversee another lawyer, I believe completing a case assessment very early on is the best way to identify the business issues and reach a decision whether to litigate or settle.”

Whether working with major corporations, small businesses or public sector employers, Bryson handles a wide range of issues, including defense against employee claims of discrimination and harassment, collective bargaining matters, workforce reductions, and (increasingly) wage and hour disputes. Often, employers who face employee lawsuits over these issues are determined to fight, and Bryson helps determine when this is advisable. “Recently, when a client was confronted with a class-based lawsuit alleging systemic underpayments of overtime wages, I worked to make sure my client was not the victim of

improper allegations and implemented the best defense strategy.

“My goal for every client,” she says, “is to reach a solution that meets their needs. For example, if faced with a union organizing drive, a private sector employer often wants an effective union avoidance strategy, while a public sector employer often prefers to focus at the collective bargaining level. In either instance, I listen to the client, define the goal, and shape the proper strategy to achieve it.”

Industry sectors of Bryson’s clients vary from financial services (particularly securities companies and investment banks) to health care providers, manufacturers and retail and food service companies. Whenever necessary, she involves Duane Morris colleagues in developing client solutions. “The lawyers here are all excellent and I’ve enjoyed and benefited from their high quality,” she notes, adding that she regularly works with lawyers from such disciplines as corporate, health care and securities law. In a typical example, she recently led a Duane Morris effort to help a newly restructured multistate securities firm navigate its response to a major governmental audit while simultaneously downsizing because of the economic downturn.

An Unusual Path

Bryson took an unusual path to develop the practice that brought her to Duane Morris. She grew up in Baltimore and went to Morgan State University as a psychology major and graduated magna cum laude. “I pursued psychology for the intellectual attraction and enjoyed the statistical discipline of it,” she recalls, adding that “in any case that involves statistics today, I’m the person who handles it.” However, she had a strong desire to move beyond statistics and work directly with people, which led her to The Ohio State University College of Law—where she was associate editor of the *Law Journal*—and to focus in employment law.

She began working in Chicago in the late 1970s and built a substantial legal practice. She had been a partner in a few of the city’s major firms before joining Duane Morris in 1999. “My colleagues are all good lawyers and decent people and that’s very important to me,” Bryson asserts, noting that, although she has served in senior firm governance positions, “my major focus today is on cross-selling and working with younger lawyers on business development. It’s tremendously satisfying to help them develop practice skills and business development ideas. It’s a way that I feel I really add value.”

Public sector service is another important element of Bryson’s career. For three years, from 1986 through 1989, she took leave from law firm practice to serve as deputy corporation counsel for the city of Chicago’s Law Department, where she directed contract administration and collective bargaining for the city’s 35,000 unionized employees. She subsequently served in Governor-elect Rod Blagojevich’s transition team as a Civil Rights Committee member and advisor.

Last year, Bryson was involved in the campaign of President Barack Obama. “I live in the Hyde Park neighborhood just a block from Obama’s home,” she says, “and I served on the campaign’s Illinois Finance Committee, its Women for Obama, and Lawyers for Obama Committees.”

Handling the Challenge

Perhaps the most severe challenge to Bryson’s commitment to excel came in 2003, when she was at the peak of her legal career. She suddenly had to cope with the loss of both her husband and her son, and the trauma of that loss contributed to debilitating health problems. “I had to use a walker to get around

and my doctor told me I had to accept that I might be crippled for the rest of my life,” she says now. Bryson refused to accept such a conclusion and explored a wide range of alternative medical treatments to help her maintain her mobility. Today, as she puts it, “I’m still standing and walking and dancing,” despite ongoing health issues, and has written a book about her medical odyssey that she is in the process of publishing. “I felt that I wouldn’t have gotten so sick if God didn’t have a purpose in it for me,” Bryson declares, “and I believe that purpose is to tell my story and help others see how they can overcome their own problems.”

Today, Bryson maintains her active practice, political involvement, and community and professional service in such capacities as a member of the Economic Club of Chicago, a board member for the DuSable Museum of African-American History, as well as a board member for Mt. Sinai Hospital. However, she adds, “I’m wise enough now to know that I have to pace myself and that I can’t work 18 hours every day to do everything, so I make an effort to appreciate the talents of others and leverage their capabilities.” That approach reinforces Bryson’s drive to excellence. “Excellence remains what I expect of myself and what I strive to help others to achieve. Life has no greater honor for anyone other than to be the best you can be.” ■